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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an overview of the educational principles of Friedrich Froebel and indicates how the Froebelian approach was introduced into Israel. The modern aspects of Froebel's ideas are emphasized as well as scientistic distortions in their implementation. Recommendations to practitioners for improving early childhood education are provided. (RH)

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THE FROEBELIAN KINDERGARTEN AS AN INTERNATIONAL MOVEMENT

In the dawn of June 21, 1852, there died in a remote Prussian mountain village a man so supremely self-confident that he predicted his ideas on education and human relationships would not be adopted for two centuries. Called "The Old Fool" by his neighbors and "The Seer" by a devoted following of educators and philosophers, he died serenely despite the knowledge that his life's work had just been outlawed by a hostile government. Few outside the field of early childhood education have heard the name of Friedrich Froebel, yet most lives in the literate world have been touched by his intellectual legacy. Perhaps the time has already come for Froebel to be understood. His theories are in the contemporary mood of Piaget and the child-centered educators. Stripped of the sentimental veneers that were applied during the Victorian age, they emphasize development of cognitive skills and of a positive self-image that will sustain a student over a lifetime of learning.

The principles upon which Froebel based his educational theories reflected a number of streams of thought. A product of the romantic post-Napoleonic era, affected by the philosophers of Pre-Darwin Europe, he studied with Pestalozzi and was the product of his minister father's Lutheranism. Primarily, however, he was a trained scientist, guided by his detailed observations of children and his understanding of human nature. The heart of his system was his faith in the active nature of learning, the concept of learning through play. He insisted on natural unfoldment of the child's capabilities within a community of mutual love and democracy where each individual was helped to gain self-realization from positive interaction with others.

Within twenty years after his death in 1852, Froebel's kindergartens were established throughout Europe. After Queen Victoria was persuaded by Charles Dickens to send her children to one in London, royalty all over Europe followed her example. Children of the industrialized slums were taken into philanthropic kindergartens to keep them out of the gutters and rich children had an identical curriculum to keep them from being spoiled. There were only ten or twelve in the United States in 1870, but by 1880 there were over four hundred in thirty states. Missionaries took the method to the Sandwich Isles, Japan, Africa—and what was then Palestine——as a method of Christian indoctrination.

The strength of the Froebelian movement here in Israel, however, did

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not come through American missionaries to the Arabs. It is a particularly good example of the synergism between two dynamic ideas. According to Bentwich (1965), the first Hebrew kindergarten was opened in the agricultural settlement of Rishon-le-Zion in 1898. Its teacher was a local girl who had trained at the Evelina Girls School in Jerusalem. I believe that the link between that first kindergarten and Froebel lies in the French origins of that early settlement and of Hebrew as a written language under the patronage of Baron Rothschild. Froebel's own rich benefactor, the Baroness Marenholtz-Bulow, had travelled through Europe to spread his ideas. When she went to Paris in 1858, Barnard (1890) says she summoned to her parlour-lectures the most distinguished representatives of all religious denominations to stress the "universal humanity" of the kindergarten. Under further impetus of the Committee of Education of the Congress of Philosophers that met from 1867 to 1872, the kindergartens spread throughout France. At the Evelina Girls School, as at the normal school in Jerusalem there were French-trained teachers who were Frobelians.

What is the connection between the kindergarten and the revival of Hebrew? As is so common, young children served an adult purpose. Although there had been various Hebrew classes in Jerusalem and the outlying areas, its adoption as an everyday language began with those early settlements like Rishon-le-Zion. Kindergartens were opened in conjunction with the elementary schools, following the French pattern, and the children learned to play and sing in both French and Hebrew. According to Bentwich, "Ever since, the kindergarten has been an organic element of the Jewish educational system. In recent times—just as in those early years—it has played an important part in helping children of immigrants to transfer easily and naturally to the—for them now—language of the country." (P. 11)

Dr. Spodek, in the introductory address of this congress, described the kindergarten of Froebel and its theory of learning through self-activity. He spoke of the "common belief system" and unity of those kindergartners who a century back formed an international network. We still have many commonalities. I once recognized the movement play in a Yugoslavian kindergarten as the familiar "Cobbler, cobbler, mend my shoe" translated into Croatian, and then two years later was delighted to visit a classroom in Bangkok where the children were chanting it in Thai. It would be a fascinating project to see how many similarities we have, but I believe the most important is our preservation of Froebel's faith in children's need to learn through activity, and to call that activity "play."

Because emphasis at this session is on infant programs, it seems particularly relevant to point out that one reason for the decline of the Froebelian kindergarten by the turn of the century was its enthusiastic misapplication of materials designed for babies. We must recognize that the kindergarten was planned as part of the continuum which begins with birth and extends into adulthood. Froebel placed great emphasis upon infancy because self-realization began with an awareness of the environment, with the need to "make the inner outer and the outer inner" which we now are familiar with under Piaget's terms of assimilation and

accommodation. He also wrote about the three-fold nature of development, similar to our affective, cognitive, and physical domains, using statements like this:

> The first phenomenon of awakening child-life is activity. It is an inner activity, showing itself by consideration of and working with what is outer, by overcoming hindrances and subduing the outer. The nature of man as growing towards, and destined to reach self-consciousness, is shown in the quite peculiar character of childhish activity even as early as when the infant awakes from the so-called three months slumber. It is shown in the child's impulse to busy himself, to be active for the progressive development of his own life.
>
> We are repeatedly impressed with the conviction that everything that is to be done for the specifically human development of the child must be connected with the fostering of this instinct to employ himself. For this instinct corresponds to man's triune activity of doing, feeling, and thinking. It corresponds to the essential nature of humanity, which is to have power and understanding, to become ever more and more self-conscious and self-determining. (Jarvis, 24)

As Froebel originally presented his system, the play materials and activities that he called gifts and occupations were not rigidly sequenced and used in routine dictated lessons as they were later on. He began with the mother-play book, Mutter und Kose lieder, with its etchings and verses to teach parents games like "pat-a-cake" or "all-gone." Its intricate detailed pictures were intended for older children to study, but toddlers would recognize such concepts as an empty bowl being licked by the family dog. He wrote that infants need to have bright objects to look at, and he suggested mirrors to flash "light birds" onto the walls, or a caged live bird.

Froebel's motto was "Come, let us live with our children." Older family members were to begin using Froebel gifts as soon as the infant could focus its eyes well. The First Gift was a set of bright yarn balls in primary colors, to be dangled on a string while the adult talked or sang about them. The Second Gift, a wooden ball and block, acquainted the older baby with qualities of hardness and contrast. The Third Gift, a 2 inch cube cut into 8 blocks, satisfied the need of a toddler to take apart and put together. Montessori later was to follow Froebel's admonition that these were to be made of natural wood, since the child could only learn one thing at a time and color would distract. Note that these were all home toys. By two and a half, kindergarten should start. And by age three, Froebel said, children should be provided with clay and drawing materials so that they could begin to symbolize their ideas, as well as with bigger blocks and accessories so that they could reproduce the world around them. The key was to anticipate and satisfy each child's developing needs, what Hunt termed "the match."

So what happened in the kindergartens of the 1890's? Teachers

produced by normal schools began to use those first three gifts with older children for whom there was no developmental significance. They memorized and routinized the Mother Play Book, and they expected children to follow dictated lessons. Manufacturers of school supplies produced kindergarten materials and included directions for their rote use. Both public and private school systems increased the numbers of children from Froebel's limit of fifteen to as many as forty or fifty per teacher, and the age span of two to seven was reduced to the fourth and fifth year only. At the same time, family participation was abandoned and community volunteers were discouraged.

There were significant political, social, and economic changes in the world during this time, also. Frobel envisioned the kindergarten as a nurturant place for children. In the 1880's, it was as if the world had become receptive of the seeds of concern for young children that had been scattered broadcast upon it. It was a period following widespread revolutions, when newly democratic governments were aware of the rights of women and children, when there was economic prosperity that made utopian ideals seem affordable, when there was innovation in education and many other areas, with much moving about of political exiles.

By the mid-1890's, a worldwide economic depression meant that philanthropies and government funds dwindled to almost nothing for young children. The leaders of the kindergarten movement began to squabble over details. And that period was followed, early in this century, by what I call the age of scientism. The intuitive methods of the Frobelian kindergarten were replaced by questionnaires and habit-training and measurements. The child study movement became the new gospel. With that new atmosphere of professionalism, it was the social worker instead of the kindergarten teacher who was depended upon for the family support system. By the end of World War I, Froebel's name was rarely mentioned. And yet, underneath, there was still a valiant effort on the part of many individuals to maintain respect for learning through play. It emerged the Montessori Method, in the nursery schools of the 1930's, and in what we call the British Infant School or alternative education.

So what can we learn from history? To me, the most important lessons are these:

1. If we believe in education through self-activity, we must continue to plan programs responsive to the needs of the children enrolled, with age-appropriate environments and materials. We must never again depend upon the magic of manufactured equipment and prescribed rote teaching.

2. Teachers should have specific educational and experiential backgrounds so that they understand and respect and relate to young children. Textbooks and passing scores on examinations are not enough.

3. Group size is critical to learning through play. Recent research has verified the original kindergarten ratio of one teacher, two assistants, and about fifteen children.

4. Just as we cannot ignore infancy as an important developmental period, neither can we emphasize any one age level. With Froebel, we can see that there is a continuum in which each period should be valued for itself.

5. Because of time constraints, it is impossible to discuss the implications of differences of opinion about the education of young children today. However, I believe that the greatest lesson we can learn from the past hundred years is that we must stick together. We have more agreements than disagreements. Because of the kindergarten network established a hundred years ago, we have a solid core of beliefs.

It is doubtful that we will ever have another receptive period like that of the 1880's, but the kindergarten pioneers would be proud of what we are accomplishing. Let's carry on, confident that the education of young children has a great future, as well as a historic past.

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